

SERVING THE LIGHTS

BY PATSY ADAM SMITH

THE LITTLE BUSH PUB was in darkness as the men filed quietly into the back bar and ordered the first of two drinks their leader would permit. It was 11.15 p.m. The publican took care that no chink of light escaped from behind the blinds.

Suddenly the whisper flicked round as only a whisper can in such a time and place: "The police. It's the cops." Into the bar burst the local constable, hatless, pulling his coat on. I was there. I'd never been "caught" in a pub before. Most of the men looked the same. "Ah, that's good," said the constable. "Thought you mightn't know who they were." He had come to make sure the publican opened up to serve the crew of the *Cape York*. That's the way Tasmanians felt about this scruffy old ship.

When the "York" sailed down the Derwent

for the last time, some of us watching her go felt that her shiny new replacement would never seem so bright.

For 25 years the *Cape York* had serviced the lights around the coasts of south-eastern Australia — Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia — one of the toughest runs for any ship in any part of the world. Box-like, belching black smoke, she had never let the light-keepers down.

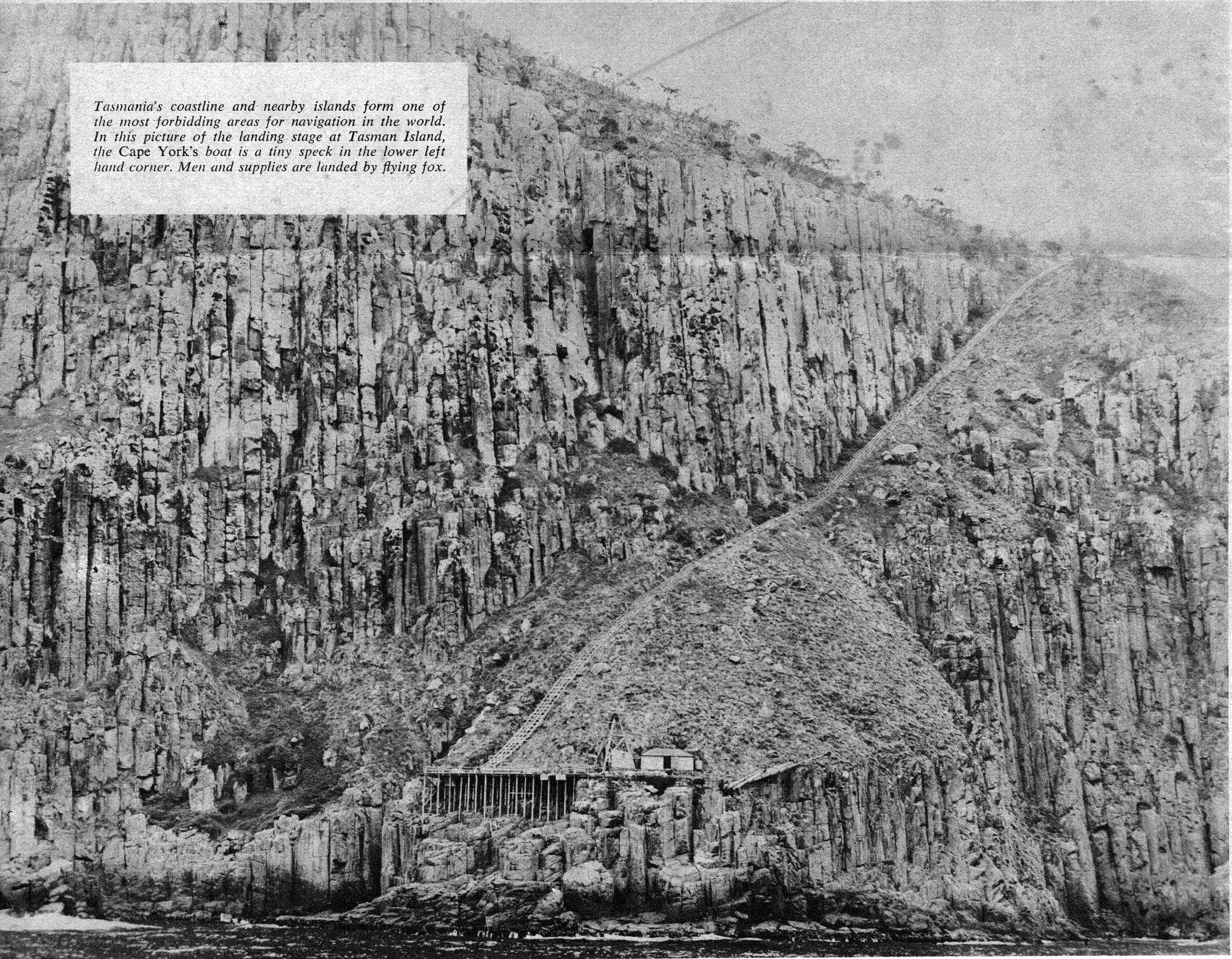
Hobart in particular misses her. Our eyes turned seawards more than the eyes of any other city in Australia, we Hobartians know our ships, and, three times a year for a lot of years, we'd looked up the river and said: "There's the 'York'." We've laughed at her old-fashioned lines and cursed her high stack for spreading black soot over the city. And we've

listened to our radios, because you could be sure that, on her run, the "York" would get in the news somewhere on this treacherous coast.

The gallantry of the "York" and the men who sailed her was accepted and expected. I did the round trip of the Tasmanian lights on her, eight years ago, and the calculated risks taken by her crew were matched only by the quiet admiration of those who tended the lights and waited for her. That trip, we fought a violent storm. For four days we battled to get into the rocks of Maatsuyker Island, down in the Roaring Forties, and each time we were driven back. A dozen times each day men risked their lives, drenched with blinding icy spray, their skins whipped red by the wind blowing unchecked from the Antarctic. And then, in what they called "a break" and what most of us would call "still a hell of a sea", they raced in between the rocks, and shuttled goods and people between the light and the ship.

That night the ship steamed back for shelter to the old convict harbour, Port Arthur. It was 11 p.m. when we dropped anchor. The boat was put over the side, and the boys were taken ashore for half an hour. Before dawn next morning, we were steaming into the flying-fox

Tasmania's coastline and nearby islands form one of the most forbidding areas for navigation in the world. In this picture of the landing stage at Tasman Island, the Cape York's boat is a tiny speck in the lower left hand corner. Men and supplies are landed by flying fox.

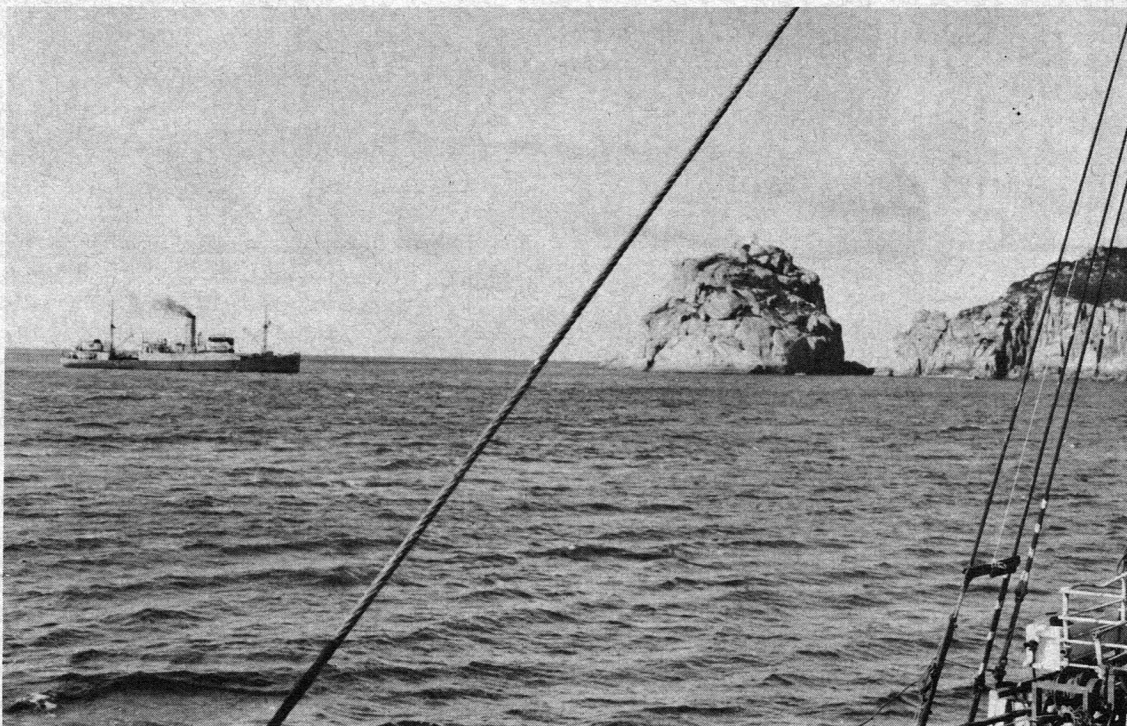


at precipitous Tasman Island, and the same boys were preparing to go over the side on the rope ladders.

I had been to sea for six years, signed on a coastal tramp, and I'd seen plenty of boating-off under near-impossible conditions, but these boys were on their own.

At Four Hummock Island, a rock off Coffin Bay, South Australia, eight seamen had gone ashore on a brooding sea, with equipment for the lighthouse. While they were unloading, the sea suddenly became ominous. A moderate swell, that had kept the two workboats bobbing near the 367-foot sheer sides of the cliffs, now intensified, and 15-foot waves were crashing on the low rocks where the men stood under the towering cliffs. They were trapped, cut off by the pounding surf from the workboats which had landed them and whose job it was to get them off again. As spray drenched them, the Chief Officer, in charge of the shore party, asked each man the same question: "Can you swim?" Some nodded, others said no. Aboard *Cape York*, anchored as close as he dared, Captain Heriot and Chief Engineer Donald Mackie watched as the two open workboats

CONTINUED OVERLEAF



Cape York steams close to Forestier Light (above) to tend the automatic beacon. Below left, crew members grease flying fox cable at Tasman Island and (below right) bos'n prepares to pick up safety line to bring lifeboat to bleak landing at Maatsuyker Island, in the path of the Roaring Forties.



COURAGE AND SUPERB SEAMANSHIP

edged towards the rocks, lurching into sight at one moment on a crest of darkening water, plunging out of view in a trough at the next.

Inshore, on the fringe of the boiling surf, Second Mate Keith Skinner kept the motor of his workboat full astern, boring back against the surge to stop it from splintering him on the granite rim of the island. At the same time lines from the shore held the boat as closely as possible to those same menacing rocks.

Standing by in the second boat, Third Mate David Bedford braced his feet on her heaving boards and kept a hand on a life-raft, ready to push it over if the need arose.

The men in the boats and those on the shore couldn't hear one another above the roar of the waves, but there was no need for words between the two officers, Skinner and Line, two of the best boatmen ever to boat-off in Australian waters and friends of the sort only dangerous work can make. Skinner tossed a heaving line to his mate on the rocks, Line caught it, collected his men's valuables and told them to strip. Swimmers or no, they were to go into the waves, and fight their way to the boat.

Line gathered their garments, as they shed them, into a bundle, which he covered with their water-proof coats. He tied the bundle to the heaving line; Skinner hauled it out through the surf to his boat, unfastened the clothing and threw the line back again. This time Line tied it round the waist of a seaman, one of the swimmers. "Jump," he snapped, and the man plunged into the water. Simultaneously Skinner

and his boat crew hauled in.

Seven men were dragged to the boat in this way, swimmers and non-swimmers alike. Last of all, after he had let the lines go ashore, came Chief Officer Bob Line himself.

Skinner was annoyed about the weather. "Could have finished to-day if she hadn't come in rough," he said, as he battled his boat out to safety.

There was nothing forced about the casual manner of these two men. They took danger lightly, because they were used to it. (The very next time they serviced Four Hummocks they had to rescue 12 men from the same place in almost identical circumstances.)

In this scientific age, with machines taking the risk out of most occupations, the work of the lighthouse supply ships remains one of the few jobs which retain a tang of adventure. It calls for tough, highly skilled men, with courage above the average. Through their very function of marking perilous headlands and waters, lighthouses pose formidable risks to the men who keep their crews supplied with food and fuel.

The Commonwealth Government conducts its lighthouse service with three ships, *Cape Don*, *Cape Otway* and (until some months ago) *Cape York*. "Don" and "Otway" service the lights on the northern and western coasts. The *Cape York* was replaced, last November, by the *Cape Pillar*, a 2,100-ton motor ship, a third again as big.

"York's" run included Australia's southernmost station, Maatsuyker Island, in the path of

the Roaring Forties, and Tasman Island, so close to mainland Tasmania that a vicious rip tide encircles it like a maelstrom.

Captain Heriot, who has done the round of the southern lights for 26 years, working his way up from Third Mate to Master, says, "I've seen all these places in all their moods, and mostly they've been ugly".

Maatsuyker was ugly, when I did the trip in the "York". Three days running, the ship steamed among the rocks and reefs, and three times high seas, crashing over the landing at the base of the 1,000-foot high, wind-swept island, forced her back again. At the fourth try, Heriot dropped anchor, and the boats were lowered, in drizzling rain, on a heaving grey sea, and we followed on rope ladders, strung over the ship's side.

Poised on the bottom rung we waited for a wave to lift one of the boats, then let go the lurching ladder and dropped in. When the boat sank in a trough, the gap between it and the end of the ladder was too big for even the most daring to leap.

Above, on *Cape York*, seamen were tying the legs of 12 sheep and a goat which had been penned on deck. When they came over the side with a line around their bellies, we thought they looked more comfortable than we had been on our way down. Sheep are brought, each trip, to Maatsuyker to provide food and the goat its milk for the three families.

There is only one small point on Maatsuyker where boats can edge near to the rocks. It is a rocky cove offering danger as well as shelter. Before unloading begins, a line is tied between the jetty and a buoy anchored at the cove's entrance as a safety measure.



Maatsuyker, named by Tasman when he sailed past in 1642, is girdled by rocks and rocky inlets; the small cove is the only landing spot anywhere round its high cliffs. When we went there, "Spanker" Carlos, a gap-toothed for'ard hand leaned out of the boat, grappled the safety line with his boat hook, and hauled us to the landing. A boat-length away, rocks, washed white with foam, reared from the water.

The "York" couldn't stand out to sea as do other ships, but had to hug close to the cliffs, so that her boats might work safely and quickly. She thus risked being wrecked at the foot of the very light she was servicing, so that other ships might avoid a similar fate.

The light on Maatsuyker is on the other side of the island from the landing, and it is an anomaly of the service that men of the lighthouse supply-ship never see the edifice. They are always too busy.

Until recent years, the sheep that *Cape York* brought were let loose at the base of the island, and found their own way to the top, or foraged on ledges. When his wife wanted chops, the keeper and his children clambered down and butchered a sheep on the ledge where they found it. It was heavy work lugging a carcass back to the lighthouse. This time, when the "York" went in, we placed the sheep four at a time on the trolley of the haulage way, which runs from the landing up the side of the island to the top where they are handier to the kitchen.

"For a man like me, who had never killed a sheep before, it was a bit tricky," head light-keeper Jeff Harrison told me. "But you're not long on 'Maat' before you get the hang of it. You've got to."

Up to 1931, the supply ship took homing pigeons to Maatsuyker when she called. They were used in emergencies to carry messages to Hobart. Now that the station has two-way radio, fishing boats can be summoned in a few hours.

On the trip I did, a change-over of personnel had to be made, which gave *Cape York* the added responsibility of taking one group of women and children safely off the island and putting another group on. Going ashore were the Barretts, Tom and Lola, and their twins, Bob and Rosemary. Coming off were Bill and Mavis Nicholls and their three children.

When the time came for Lola Barrett and her children to leave the "York" they were put into a big wicker basket on the ship's deck, and lowered by ship's hoist into the boat on the lurching sea. When they were put ashore at the landing stage their ordeal was only half over. The haulage-way was still to come.

Rising 900 feet up the steep face of the rock island, the haulage-way has a grade in places of one-in-one. Passengers begin the ascent sitting on the small wooden trolley, but are practically standing with their backs on its floor on the steepest sections. Lola and her children went up immediately after the sheep.

A telephone connecting the top of the haulage to the bottom enables keepers above and below to tell one another when a trolley is needed. Jeff Harrison told me that a trolley once got away from the top by accident. The top keeper telephoned quickly to warn the keeper below, "She's a-coming," he yelled. "She's a-gone," his mate answered.

Accidents are rare, however. The cable is tested regularly, and the way itself is always inspected before passengers are taken up. "You take care on a lonely station like this," Jeff told me. "Even with two-way radio you feel terribly isolated when something goes wrong; particularly when there's a child sick, or the likes."

Low scrub, bent parallel to the ground by the prevailing winds, covers most of the island, and no tree or shrub is permitted to be cut. "They're frightened the whole flaming island will blow away if we lose the trees," Jeff jokes, with a certain amount of truth. The only fauna there are small marsupial mice and swarms of mutton birds, which come once a year to lay their eggs. Aborigines used to come in bark rafts before the settlement of Tasmania, but, apart from the light-keepers, no one has ever lived on the stormy island.

Back on the boat as night was closing in, young "Spanker" Carlos was knocked overboard when a pack of timber, caught in the gale, swung into him. He clambered out in his oilskins, in time to see a 12-foot beam being loaded swish by where his Boatman Mate's head had been a second before. "Ah, this run's always good for a laugh," he spluttered, as he climbed back into the boat.

After Maatsuyker light, the *Cape York* serviced Tasman Island. Here there is no landing for the boat at all. Instead, a basket was let down on a flying-fox over the water, and the seamen had to wait their chance to fasten the big hook on to the basket-load of passengers in their boat, and signal for it to be hauled up to the landing-stage, 100 feet up the cliff. From there, a haulage-way as steep and similar to

that on Maatsuyker leads to the top of the 1,000-foot island.

As day broke that day near Tasman, five of us went over the side of the "York" on the rope ladder, the second mate Skinner, "Spanker" Carlos, I to take photographs and the bos'n and a seaman. These last two had the unenviable job of greasing the cable of the flying-fox before it was used by passengers. "Spanker" hooked the basket as Keith Skinner juggled the boat in the big seas. Twice he had to release the safety catch and let the hook go, when great waves threw the boat high or dropped it too low in a trough. Then the bos'n, Vic Clayton, and his assistant were swinging above us, sliding along the cable with the ease and surety of circus performers, but with the care and safety that gave confidence to the men, women and children who, later in the day, were hauled up this cable.

A tribute to their care and the regard in which the *Cape York* and her men were held was the confidence of the 12 women and 14 children being moved. Not once did they hesitate, and this was one of the roughest trips they'd had. They went into the basket, and out immediately they heard the gentle but firm command: "All right now, Mrs. Harrison." Said Lola: "If they say it's all right, then it's all right."

Perhaps no greater tribute could be paid to the men of the "York", as she sailed on her last trip down the Derwent, blowing her siren opposite the house of a retired Maatsuyker keeper now living in Hobart, hoisting a signal to the elderly widow of another keeper in d'Entrecasteaux Channel. The tribute has become a tradition, and the tradition a legend.

